

love so life - when the cherry blossoms bloom novel translation

A NIGHT OF STORMS

chapter 1

Original work by Kouichi Kaede

Novel by Mochizuki Yue

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'I'll wait. It's fine.'

I said that, but –

'Maybe I should've said it a different way...'

A senior from my company walking in front of me turned around after hearing what I said.

'What's that, Matsunaga? Your comment today wasn't bad, you know?'

'No, I just... That's not it.'

'Oh, are you talking about yesterday's *ATTACK: THE MOTHER-IN-LAW NEXT DOOR*? I did think your reaction was a bit... You coughed that stewed dish right out.'

'... Because it was incredibly fishy. She said herself that she'd forgotten to put in ginger to mask that.'

'Seems the mother-in-law didn't notice because hay fever's messed with her sense of smell. The wife herself bowed to us afterwards, saying she was thankful for the direct response, so everything's fine in the end. But as an announcer, it was still a bit not OK, I guess.'

'... Please go into the studio. You're waiting because of the strong wind warning, right?'

'I'll be waiting until tomorrow morning. What a spot of luck. Are you heading back already?'

'I need to pick up my niece and nephew.'

'Ah, you're looking after twins, right?'

'Yes, with the help of... Well, there's the part-timer at the nursery.'

'They're at a nursery now then. If you don't go soon, it'll start raining too. See you tomorrow.'

'Yes, until tomorrow.'

I parted with my senior at the back exit of the TV station and stopped once outside.

I looked up.

The sky was a dull grey, and the wind was a bit strong.

There was a low pressure system today, and the wind would become stronger afterwards.

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I didn't run into any traffic in the cab. We slid right through between the buildings.

There were two kinds of cab driver who noticed I was an announcer: those that talked to me in a friendly manner, and ones who kept silent instead. The drivers near the station were often of the type that kept silent to be kind to me, and the driver today was included in that number. After I told the driver where I wanted to go, no other words were exchanged.

Though that was normally easier for me, today it was tough.

... It was fine at work.

It was fine when I was talking with someone else.

But when I was alone like this – in the silence – I couldn't help but think about it.

'Nakamura-san, I love you.'

'After you've seen more of the world, and you're about... my age. If that time comes, would you still... give me a thought?

'It's fine, I'll wait.

'I won't complain even if you reject me after I've waited.'

Did I trouble her by saying something like that?

How did she take it?

... Would she consider what I said seriously?

I had no regrets about confession.

Yet, I still felt anxiety in my heart.

I felt that those words were too heavy for a high school girl of only seventeen. And yet – the words had to be said... I had to say them.

'...'

That night.

She had been adorable, bright red with a question mark on her face.

Had it been such a shock? Something so unbelievable that she'd think it was a dream?

If that was the case, there was the possibility that she'd never even looked at me as a member of the opposite sex until now...

... But it wasn't as if her response had been unfavourable, and –

And...

Thinking back on Nakamura-san's attitude in all the time we've spent together, even if I wouldn't call it romantic, she does like me as a person... or perhaps that's just what I want to think.

My thoughts just kept running circles in my head. I didn't have an answer.

What was the toughest was –

'It's coming down now.'

'Eh?'

The sudden voice made me turn to the front.

The man, who was just starting to look old, continued speaking as the car's wipers moved.

'The rain's coming down now. It'll probably get stronger.'

'Ah...'

Now that he mentioned it, I noticed that the rain had begun. I had been looking out the window, but I hadn't seen the rain at all.

'... Yes, I think it'll get stronger from now on.'

The rain and wind would settle by morning.

There would be violent winds tonight. It would be a night of storms.

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'I won't go home!'

'I'm gonna stay with Shiharu-tan!'

The twins – Akane and Aoi – were clinging to Nakamura-san's arms. Nakamura-san smiled, looking at a loss as she patted the twins' heads.

'I apologise. I was reading them a picture book earlier, but it's from a series and it seems they want me to read the next one.'

She bowed towards me. She was wearing the apron she always did with the kids.

She was like a young and kind mother. When I looked at her, I felt strangely at ease. She looked very cute with the twins following her about.

Then, Nakamura-san seemed to notice my gaze. She cocked her head and asked hesitantly, 'Is something the matter?'

My heart leapt when she looked up. Since I had been thinking about a number of things earlier, I felt shaken with the real person in front of me.

Then, without thinking –

'Oh, I just thought it was cute.'

– the words slipped out of my mouth.

'It is, isn't it? Akane-chan got her clothes dirty today so we changed her into something else, but with her red dress with white polka dots and the green hair tie, she looks like a strawberry.'

'...'

Though I was relieved that she thought I was talking about the twins, it also made me feel a bit sad.

Nakamura-san would probably feel unnecessarily self-conscious if she thought I'd said she was cute, what with what I had said the other day, so it was for the best that she thought I was talking about the twins... No, wait.

On the contrary, wasn't it fine to be direct now that I had already confessed? If I acted too normal, she might forget completely...

No, that wouldn't happen. Nakamura-san wasn't the sort of girl who would forget someone's confession. It would be better to not doing anything half-heartedly, so that we can continue like we always have...

What was the point in thinking so much? I had to take the twins right now.

I knelt down to match my gaze with Akane's and Aoi's.

'Akane, Aoi. We have to go home now.'

'Nooo!'

'Read one more!'

'Now – '

Aoi hid behind Nakamura-san, while Akane gripped her apron, glaring at me. There was nothing I could say now...

'Now, you two. There's going to be a storm soon.'

Nakamura-san's words made the twins look up, curious.

'Storm?'

'What's that?'

'A storm is reeeally strong winds! And it'll rain tonight too. If Akane-chan and Aoi-kun walk outside then, you'll get blown away!'

'Eh!?'

'No! I won't blow away!'

The twins had turned pale and started to shiver. Nakamura-san smiled and patted them on the head.

'Scary, right? So go home before the wind gets strong, OK? The wind will die down by next morning when you come again, so stay with Matsunaga-san tonight.'

'...'

'The picture book...'

The twins still wouldn't give up. They held onto Nakamura-san's sleeve. Then, Nakamura-san held out her pinky finger.

'If you come together, I'll read you all the books you want! I'll even add paper puppets! I promise.'

'Paper puppets too!?'

'Promise!'

'Yes, so let's make a pinky promise.'

Akane's and Aoi's eyes were sparkling as they sang the pinky promise song. When Nakamura-san stood up, our eyes met again.

But –

'...'

She definitely averted her eyes. I don't think it was my imagination.

'... I'll take Akane and Aoi home then. Thank you.'

'... Yes, be careful on the way back. See you tomorrow, Akane-chan, Ao-kun.'

She only looked at the twins... Actually, her gaze was so low it was unnatural. Nakamura-san held the twins hands.

'See you, Shiharu-tan!'

'See you!'

'...'

She had been like this for the past little while.

She only looked at the twins, paying them more attention than she had before, but she definitely put a distance between us. At least, that was what I felt...

Though perhaps there was no helping it, it still...

Nakamura-san's attitude was part of the reason my thoughts wouldn't stop. Though it wasn't in any way her fault...

'... It's tough.'

Though I hadn't meant for anyone to hear, Aoi put a hand on my knee as he put on his knees. It seemed he had heard... This kept happening today.

'Sei-tan, what's wrong? Fever?'

He put a hand on my forehead. Nakamura-san probably did this for him usually. The small hand on my forehead had a child's warmth.

'... No, it's nothing. Thank you. Akane, Aoi, let's go – the car's waiting. Be careful not to slip on the wet ground.'

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When we reached home, it was cold inside, being March. The twins cried out. 'Cooold!' 'So cooold!' It was mysterious how they always found the weather interesting, whether it was good, rainy, hot or cold.

'It might end up as a blackout, so let's get you into the bath quick.'

'Sei-tan, how about our coats?'

'Take off your coats and put them where you usually do! They're not that wet, so you can just hang them up like

usual, right?'

'It's cold!'

'Even if it's cold, take off your coat once you get inside. It'll warm right up when I turn on the heater.'

The twins had recently learnt to take off their coats and put them away on their own, so there was less for me to do when we came home. These little rules were probably also things Nakamura-san taught them.

As I pulled the curtains closed, I checked the look of the sky. The raindrops were getting bigger and the wind had started to howl.

'... Scary.'

I looked down for the source of the little voice. Akane was clinging to my legs. It was unusual for Akane, who always had such a big personality, so I ended up smiling drily without thinking.

'The wind sounds scary, doesn't it? But it's OK. We're inside the house.'

Akane nodded, still looking up at the sky. The wind was getting even stronger.

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A NIGHT OF STORMS

chapter 2

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It was 11:30 PM.

I put the twins to bed and went back to the living room, turning on the television.

The senior that I parted ways with this evening was explaining the low pressure system on the news.

The low pressure system's effects would end tonight. He had said earlier that it would last until morning, but it seemed to have quickened.

'... Which means the next few hours are the main contest,' I murmured, though I didn't know what the contest was for. I poured myself some coffee. I did want to drink beer, but who knew what would happen on a night like this. It would be better not to drink.

Nakamura-san's mug was on the shelf.

But I didn't need such obvious evidence. The kitchen was cleaner than it had been when I haphazardly tidied it up the other day. There was a new tin of coffee. There were more of the twins' favourite snacks. I could feel her presence all over the kitchen.

She wasn't here though.

Of course she wasn't here. And yet –

'Ah...'

... Was I always such a soft man?

Feeling lonely just because I was in a room filled with the presence of the girl I liked even though she herself wasn't there... It was pathetic for a man of my age.

Even though I had dated people before, my emotions had never been in such disorder before.

But this had to be what really caring about somebody meant, and knowing this feeling was probably a happy thing. I needed to thank Nakamura-san for that. That said...

Since I had declared that I would wait for her response to my confession, I would have to wait by myself for another ten years without knowing her reply.

'... That's really long...'

The murmur escaped my lips.

Actually, I had been speaking to myself far more often lately.

'...'

... Things would probably have been completely different if Nakamura-san acted the same as usual.

Ever since that night, Nakamura-san was always nervous when we met, and she only spoke formally, without meeting my eyes. Though I had expected this response, I hadn't expected how painful and lonely it would feel.

'No, but it might have been tough on me if she acted too normal as well.'

If she acted like everything was normal and nothing had happened at all, I probably would have been troubled by that too. What on earth did I want?

... This was no use. I had been worrying over the same thing since evening. Even though there was no answer.

With my coffee in my hand, I sat on a chair in the kitchen. Then, I heard the window rattle. I heard thunder through the sound of the pounding rain... Did spring storms often have thunder? I couldn't remember.

Anyway, it seemed I would have to start seriously worrying about a blackout. If I remembered correctly, there was a torch in the stand by the front door. What else would I need... I wouldn't be able to move around if the twins woke up, so I needed to get everything ready first.

I took the torch from the entrance and got the emergency candles, just in case. Even if there was a blackout, it would probably be fixed within half a day if it was caused by lightning, so all there was left to do was sleep. All that was necessary were lights. I had switched the batteries for the torch just the other day.

... I wonder if Nakamura-san's facility has all these things too.

It should. Children stayed there, so they probably had more than enough emergency supplies. I didn't have to worry about her.

But how did she spend nights like this?

I wonder if she was afraid of the thunder, or the wind.

Would she tremble under her covers?

What did she do in the dark room, in bed by herself?

... When those thoughts crossed my mind, I felt discomposed.

I wanted to be by her side, but that wasn't my role now.

... And I didn't even know if that was necessary.

Lightning struck once more. It was close this time. It was loud. And right afterwards –

'Aaaaaaahhhh!'

Akane ran out of the bedroom screaming. Aoi tottered out after her while rubbing his eyes.

'Sei-tan! It's scary! And loud!'

'Ah, right, that was a big one just now.'

Akane scrambled onto my lap with incredible speed, but in contrast, Aoi just cocked his head slowly and said, 'Drums?'

'Drums? Ah, maybe. The thunder god is hitting drums up in the sky.'

'Don't want drums! No!'

Akane must have been very surprised by the thunder. She shook her head furiously while crying. I pulled out the chair next to me and sat Aoi down while rubbing Akane's back.

'It was scary. You were surprised, right? But that was probably the closest one, and the others will be farther away...'

Just as I said it, there was another bang.

It was deafening, a shock even to an adult like myself.

'...!'

'No! It's scary!!'

'I get it, I get it, so calm down, OK!?'

Then, the next moment, there was a boom, like the air itself had roared, and the electricity went out.

'It's dark!!'

'Ghosts are coming!!'

'... Ah... A blackout with this timing...'

Even Aoi, who had been so nonchalant, was clinging to me, panicked in the dark. Akane was hugging my neck so tightly that I couldn't breathe.

'Wai... Akane... my neck...'

'It's dark! The ghost came out!'

'No! Shiharu-tan, Shiharu-tan!'

'It isn't a ghost! This is called a blackout. When lightning hits the power lines, the electricity is stopped...'

'Shiharu-taaan!'

'Shiharu-tan, where are you!?'

'...'

They probably wouldn't have been in such a panic if it was just our house with the lights out, but because of the blackout, the entire area was pitch-black. Even an adult like me wasn't used to dark like this, so I could imagine how frightened the twins were.

However.

'I'm saying that it's hard for me to breathe...!'

'It's scary and dark!! Ghosts!!'

'Shiharu-taaan!!'

The two kept tugging at me, to the point that I was about to fall over, and I still couldn't breathe – a matter of life or death. I was pretty serious.

'Nakamura-san isn't here! It's just dark! Nothing's wrong, so calm down!'

'Nooo, Shiharu-taaan!!'

'Waaahhhhh!!'

Aoi had started wailing too. This was bad... When both Akane and Aoi started crying, it became a feedback loop. If Nakamura-san were here, she would be able to soothe them, but...

'I'm saying, nothing's wrong...!'

'Shiharu-taaan!'

'Shiharu-taaaaan! Waaahhhhh!!'

'... You guys, you're just thinking about yourselves, but Nakamura-san might be feeling scared right now too.'

'... Eh?'

'Shiharu-tan...?'

The twins immediately sopped crying. I took the chance to reach out and turn on the torch and stand it up on the table. The room became slightly brighter, so I could finally see the twins' faces.

'Bright...'

'How's Shiharu-tan...?'

Aoi looked up at me with a tear-streaked face. I took the twins in my arms and looked outside.

'Now, can you see? It's completely dark outside. It's not only us who've had a blackout. All the houses nearby are dark too. Maybe Nakamura-san's place is dark too.'

'Shiharu-tan's place too?'

'Dark? Crying?'

Even though they had been crying up until just earlier, they had forgotten about that in their concern. I was relieved that they had stopped crying though, and I patted them on their backs.

'I don't think she's crying, but she might have been surprised by the blackout.'

'...'

'I'm going to Shiharu-tan's place!'

'We can't go, not in this rain.'

'Let's go!'

'Ca... Eh? Ah, hey, Akane?'

Akane leapt off my lap and started running through the dark house. Then, she found my mobile charging in front of the television and ran back with it to me.

'Here, Sei-tan, call!'

'Talk to Shiharu-tan!'

'Eh... No, er...'

'Talk to her!'

'Is Shiharu-tan OK!?''

... I'd be headed for an explosion if I didn't listen to what they said. I took the mobile from Akane but hesitated as I looked at it.

Was it OK for me to call her now?

It was still before eleven, so she was probably awake. I had called her fairly casually up until now, but...

'Maybe Shiharu-tan's crying...' Aoi said vehemently as he clung to my lap.

She might be crying.

... Ah, that was right. Just as the twins were worried about Nakamura-san, I was anxious as well.

I put my hand on Aoi's head. It was warm, maybe because he had cried too much.

'... That's right, let's call.'

-

The phone rang.

One ring. Two rings. Then –

'Yes...!'

Nakamura-san's clear voice came through.

'Sorry for calling so suddenly. Are you all right, Nakamura-san?'

'I'm fine. I was just thinking about whether I should call myself.'

'... Eh?'

'Since the thunder was so loud, I thought that Akane-chan and Aoi-kun would definitely be crying and that you might be troubled... But if I called when they were asleep, it might wake them up...'

'Ah... So that's why you sounded a bit flustered when you answered.'

'Yes, excuse me for that. I was so surprised by the timing. Is there a blackout where you are too?'

'“Too” means that your power is out as well. It must be out in this whole area.'

'... Sei-tan.'

As I talked to Nakamura-san, Akane pulled at my sleeve. It looked like Aoi wanted to talk too.

'Nakamura-san, could you talk to the twins? They were pestering me to call because they were worried about you.'

'Eh, really? I'm sorry! Please let me talk to them!'

I put the mobile on speaker and gave it to Akane and Aoi.

'Here, Akane, Aoi.'

'... Shiharu-tan...?'

'OK...?'

The two of them put their face close to the mobile and started talking hesitantly.

'I'm OK! Thanks for worrying about me.'

Their faces shone upon hearing Nakamura-san's voice, but then they darkened again.

'Y'know, it's really dark here.'

'It went BANG!'

'Shiharu-tan, are you crying?'

'Not crying?'

'... You were the ones who were crying, right?'

I thought I heard a giggle from the phone after my mumble.

'I'm not crying. It was a bit scary, but I feel better after hearing Akane-chan's and Aoi-kun's voices!'

'Really?'

'OK?'

'I'm OK. How about you two? Are you crying?'

'I'm not crying!'

'I'm fine!'

The twins declared that openly, which made me slightly irritated – they had been making such a fuss just earlier – but I did understand their desire to act tough. I decided not to say anything... Nakamura-san probably knew anyway.

'Then you two, be good kids and stay with Matsunaga-san. Matsunaga-san must be scared too.'

'... Sei-tan is scared too?'

'Really...?'

'I'm sure of it. So do your best, you two.'

'... Do my best.'

'Pat Sei-tan on the head.'

The two of them nodded, looking serious. I took the mobile back and smiled wryly.

'Er, sorry about that.'

'No, I'm sorry for pulling you into this.'

'That's fine... Nakamura-san, were you all right with the thunder?'

'I'm fine. Completely all right.'

'But you said you were a little frightened earlier.'

'Ah... Rather than frightened, I was just surprised that the sound came from so close.'

'Oh, I see. I wonder where it struck.'

'Lightning strikes metal, doesn't it?'

'... Not always. It appears to strike taller locations often.'

'Really!? Doesn't metal have anything to do with it...? From what the teacher said, I was sure...'

From what she said, it seemed she had thought that lightning always struck metal. This part of her was cute.

'... Even so, mobile phones are convenient.'

'Mobile phones?'

'At first, I thought I wouldn't be able to call, because the power was out. Since the facility's phone wouldn't work. But then I thought about it, and remembered that I could still use my mobile.'

'Ah, you can use them as long as they're charged. Thanks to that, I got to hear your voice, Nakamura-san.'

'... Eh?'

'... It wasn't just the twins who were worried. I was worried too. I was sure you'd be fine, since you're you, Nakamura-san, but... Akane and Aoi gave me an excuse to call.'

'Ah...'

There was a moment of silent. Then –

'Thank you... very much.'

A quiet voice, tinged with embarrassment.

She was probably pink in the face, holding the phone in both hands.

It was slightly frustrating that I couldn't see her like that.

'... Your call... Getting to hear your voice, Matsunaga-san... also makes me happy... Ah!'

'Eh...? Ah.'

Just as Nakamura-san stopped speaking, the lights went on.

The twins looked up at the ceiling and exclaimed in delight.

'Sei-tan! It's bright!'

'Bright!'

'Really bright!'

'The power is back on here. How about at your place, Nakamura-san?'

'Yes, things are fine here as well. It's so bright it's a bit hard to see.'

'There probably won't be any more blackouts tonight... Nakamura-san, will you be going to sleep then?'

'Yes, right away. How about you, Matsunaga-san?'

'I'm going to sleep too. It's a bit early, but once I get the twins in bed, I think I'll go right to sleep.'

'Hehe, I see... Good night then.'

'Good night. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Yes, until tomorrow.'

I hung up and put the mobile on the table. There was a clattering noise.

Her voice, clear like a bell, still rung in my ear.

'Sei-tan, we'll stay with you.'

'It's not scary!'

Akane and Aoi pulled on both sides of my clothes. I put my hands on their hands and ruffled their hair.

'Thank you... Thanks to you, I got to talk to her.'

... Your call... Getting to hear your voice, Matsunaga-san... also makes me happy...

What was she doing now, after she had hung up?

Was she in bed, falling asleep?

Was she staying up a little longer to check the news for the weather?

If possible, I wanted to share this time with her one day.

To stay by her side on nights like this, and see her up close.

But it was still too soon for that.

'Akane, Aoi. I'm scared, so would you sleep together with me?'

'OK!'

'I'll pat you on the head, Sei-tan.'

I tugged on the hands of the twins who had given me the chance to meet Nakamura-san and headed towards the

bedroom.